

EDITORIAL

KEIKO YASUKAWA and STEPHEN BLACK

Social practice approaches to literacy and numeracy provide a framework for examining and interpreting people's local literacies and numeracies within a dynamic relationship with the wider social environment of their lives. These approaches help to uncover the importance of paying attention to how the local and the global interact in tension to shape adults' lives and learning, and how this in turn poses critical questions about the role of literacy and numeracy in improving people's lives. This issue of *Literacy and Numeracy Studies* illustrates some of these tensions between the local and global.

The first article by Maree Keating questions the basis upon which Australian policies in vocational education and training (VET) and labour market and workplace literacy and numeracy programs rests. The official rhetoric suggests that improved literacy and numeracy creates VET pathways which in turn improve labour market outcomes. While this is a neat logic for policy makers, Keating's study suggests that completion of VET qualifications has not led to employment outcomes for many retrenched workers in the Australian manufacturing industry except for some in limited low-paid employment. She emphasizes the significant structural barriers that retrenched workers, and particularly the older workers face when breaking into a job market that is increasingly characterized by casualisation and income polarisation. These structural barriers can neither be explained nor overcome by individuals obtaining qualifications or improving their literacy and numeracy skills. However, what Keating has found among the workers in her study that helped them to navigate their way through the transition from retrenchment was the social capital – the enduring friendships and connections – that developed through the particular post-retrenchment support program that was developed for them.

The second article by Judy Hunter and Margaret Franken shifts our gaze to health literacy in New Zealand. Health literacy, a dimension of adult literacy that was highlighted in the 2006 international Adult Literacy and Life Skills survey, has been a growing area of work for both health and literacy professionals, and as the authors show, the subject of research in recent years. The authors argue that the assumption that sits behind dominant discourses about health literacy is that patients' health improvement is impeded by poor compliance with medical advice resulting from patients' being unable to properly read the relevant medical information texts. This linear logic is challenged by the authors through

their analysis of medical information texts and interviews with health professionals. They show how both the texts and the practitioners' views do not reflect understanding of the complex cultural, affective, political, economic, as well as linguistic challenges, and that they in turn remove, rather than build, agency for decision making away from the patients.

Keating's and Hunter and Franken's articles remind us of the need to attend to the local contexts – the learners' needs as well as resources, when planning programs that aim to reposition them in the wider economic and social environments that are shaped by larger global discourses. The next two articles in this issue present us with analyses of pedagogical practices within health literacy and labour market programs that show us how learners' needs and resources are being negotiated at particular sites of learning.

Stephen Black, Anne Ndaba, Christine Kerr and Brian Doyle report on a partnership between a health centre and an Aboriginal college in a major Australian city that provided a literacy program to the health centre clients. The client group included 'at risk' young people, sex workers and people who injected drugs who would come to the health centre for a range of health related issues. Although many 'health literacy' programs focus on literacy and numeracy related to the various health services sought by their clients, the program that emerged was quite different. The teacher taught what might be characterized as a formal workbook-based literacy program because this is what the clients asked for and wanted. However, because of the way support was provided to the clients in the literacy program – including the classroom dynamics, removal of any stigma attached to attendance or lack of attendance, ease of access, and the presence of an Aboriginal health officer and counsellor in addition to the literacy teacher, there were significant social capital outcomes that emerged within the client group over the course of the literacy program. Referring back to the earlier discussion of Keating's article, these social capital outcomes may prove as significant, if not more, than particular literacy skills development that may emerge from such programs.

In the final article, Sue Ollerhead examines the classroom pedagogies of working with very low-literate learners participating in a labour market program in Australia. The author examines how the teachers she observed were responding to the changes in and development of their learners' identities through the learners' period in the course. Here, she found two teachers negotiating the tension between the local (what the learners bring to the classroom) and the global (what the dominant, universalising curriculum requires of teachers) in different ways. This article highlights how it is not only learners who are navigating their own needs against the more powerful discourses of what literacy and numeracy learning is about

and for, but the teachers who are caught between what the learners bring and seek, and what they are being required to do by accountability regimes from above.

Finally, we have in this issue a book review by Ross Forman. He reviews a resource on phonics for adult literacy teachers. Forman provides a helpful walkthrough of the book and assesses its potential value as a reference or professional development resource for adult literacy teachers.

